Worst Wildfires Ignite Best In Emergency Team

Contributed by Mike Tharp
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Some of the worst wildfires in California history ignited some of the best in the Corps.

A dozen October/November blazes in five counties killed at least 22 people, burned more than 3,600 homes and 1,200 other structures and charred nearly 740,000 acres. Damage is estimated in the billions, and the cost of fighting the fires nudged $200 million.

Even as the stench of burnt aluminum, melted into teardrop-shaped

puddles, still hung in the ash-laden air, South Pacific Division and other Corps workers streamed into the ravaged areas. As with other natural disasters, the Corps deployed Emergency Support Function (ESF) teams within hours of getting the call from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Ever since the Stafford Act was passed in 1988, the Corps has mobilized to provide public works and engineering support for lifesaving, life-protection and recovery after a major disaster. ESF teams already had dealt with hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, tornados, mudslides and other forest fires, so they segued into a well-ordered drill in California.

Kelley Aasen, team leader from the South Pacific Division in San Francisco, arrived at the makeshift emergency headquarters in Pasadena Oct. 29. For the next several weeks, the Corps veteran—who started responding to emergency sirens with the Loma Prieta Bay Area earthquake in 1989—took off only a handful of hours. Otherwise, he coordinated Corps efforts with those of other federal and state agencies. Somehow, rooted at one of three long tables facing three wall-sized maps, Aasen missed the glamour and glitz of being near Hollywood.

Coordination meant manning phones and laptops, attending limitless meetings, assessing what was being done and still needed to be done on the ground, sharing information among agencies and accompanying visiting VIPs on their rounds. Reporting that all was within normal limits, Aasen said the Corps efforts “help a lot of people. If we’re called out, all resources are pulled toward the response.”

Unlike more all-encompassing natural disasters such as hurricanes, these wildfires didn’t require the full-court press of a major Corps mission that can last for months. The Division’s strategy was focused on five main jobs: debris management, temporary housing, geographic information systems (GIS), a deployable tactical operations center and technical assistance.

And although by mid-November most of the wildfires were extinguished or under control, team members then had to contend with the inevitable ripple effects from fire-scoured hills and mountains—mudslides after heavy rains and debris runoff clogging flood control basins. Luckily, thunderstorms the first week of November didn’t cause either, but L.A. District Emergency Ops Branch chief Ed Andrews was ready. “The District’s history of responding to disasters is good,” the recent returnee from Iraq said. “We’ve done it before, and our Crisis Management Team is meeting every day in anticipation of us being asked for assistance.”

Andrews noted that his counterpart from San Francisco, Duke Roberts, came down to help, and Andrews linked the multi-district approach to USACE 2012: “You pull folks in where needed and strengthen what you’ve got, especially in emergency situations. The Corps is very good at that.”

A look at what emergency team members did on the scorched earth of the Golden State illustrates their wide-ranging contributions to relief and recovery efforts.

Mark Wingate’s middle name is Edward, but it just as easily could be “Debris.” The 11-year Corps veteran, disaster program manager for the Division and a debris subject matter expert, has dealt with more junk, refuse and rubbish than Sanford & Son. It’s probably an exaggeration to declare, paraphrasing the Robert Duvall colonel in “Apocalypse Now,” that Wingate loves the smell of debris in the morning. But he did extend—by five months--a post-hurricane tour in St. Thomas overseeing the noxious Bovoni Landfill. “Once someone started a fire in the middle of the night in the car pile,” he recalled. “There must have been five different colors of smoke. In the end about 50 people went to the hospital, and I was one of them.”

Besides his ground-zero work after several hurricanes, Wingate also negotiated minefields driving downrange throughout Bosnia and Croatia to assess hazardous material storage and to oversee cleanups in base camps in 1996-97; conducted structural safety assessments after the 1994 Northridge Earthquake; and literally tunneled his way beneath the ruins of the World Trade Center to inspect a shaky subterranean wall in 2001.

After the recent wildfires, he and his fellow experts Beau Hanna and Eddie Sosebee, from Mobile District, estimated the volume of debris at 350,000 cubic yards—well below the 20 million cubic yards left by Hurricane Andrew or the 6 million from Georges, but enough to warrant the Corps’ expertise.

They categorized debris into recyclable metal, metal appliances, household hazardous waste, construction and demolition debris. The litany of burned-up stuff resembled Johnny Cash’s auctioneer-like list of cities in “I’ve Been Everywhere”: ash, partially standing masonry/stucco walls, concrete, appliances, loose masonry/tile, metal framing, metal furniture, power poles, partially burned trees and automobiles.

One of those automobiles, seared down to its rims and chassis, sat on the shoulder of Mountain Avenue near San Antonio Dam, a casualty of the Padua fire.

Wingate, Rick Castro of the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services and Michael Raphael of FEMA/Homeland Security stopped to speak with Rick McElwain. The 40-year-old Flagstaff, Ariz., resident had been manning a bulldozer to clean up the remains of his parents’ house, demolished by the same 200-foot-wide tornado of fire that engulfed McElwain’s brother Mickey in what was once a Nissan. Mickey was now in the Arrowhead Regional Medical Center with burns over 80% of his body.

“One thing that’s holding me up is there’s no place to take this debris,” Rick said, waving toward a pile he had bladed together. Later, as they drove to another site, Wingate reflected: “I just can’t say enough good about that guy because he’s doing it right.. That’s a perfect example of getting your debris to the right-of-way to implement a roadside pickup.”

A few miles northwest, all that was left of most of the 70-year-old homes in Palmer Canyon were stone chimneys jutting to the sky, a barbecue grill itself grilled, a statue of two lovers blackened like shadows. At what used to be the two-bedroom home of Fred Turnbull and Girija Karamcheti, Wingate said, “We’re sorry about your house,” then listened as the couple described what happened and outlined their plans. “Clearly this canyon would be a lot safer if this road could be widened and some of those trees thinned,” said Turnbull. Wingate peered up at some of the singed and teetering eucalyptus. “The criterion for eligible debris is imminent threat to the public—and that’s an imminent threat,” he said.

Some 40 miles east of there, at Big Bear and Lake Arrowhead--two of the state’s most popular mountain resorts—another ESF member was on a quixotic quest for flat land. T. Pete Thompson, with Omaha District but based at Fort Carson, Colo., formed part of the temporary housing team, along with Jack Rose, Alan Ruff and Kim Mulhern.

His mission, which took him through several mile-high cauterized communities: Find level lots to put travel trailers for fire victims unable to get their own interim living quarters while their homes were being rebuilt or before they relocated.

Consulting maps and Web site printouts of mobile home companies in the area, the former Army major flourished his “get-out-of-jail” FEMA sign to pass through police barricades still keeping out the public. On State Highway 189 near Lake Arrowhead, he visited Blue Jay Village Co. and spoke with general manager Michele (cq) Nadler about possible sites. Nadler asked maintenance manager Jesus Rios to show Thompson unoccupied land above one of the firm’s trailer parks, and Rios bounced the native Arkansan in his 4-wheel-drive Ford 350 up the ridge. Walking through undamaged cedars, Thompson said, “I think this is too steep” for mobile homes, but thanked Nadler on his way to the next location.

Which was a gravel-topped landfill. Thompson got out and photographed the area, wondering aloud whether contamination would preclude its use. Then on to Lakeside Trailer Park where manager Nick Fogg told him he had “only one other space left—the rest are torn up, dug up, putting in water lines.” But he referred Thompson, unfailingly polite to everyone he met, to another trailer park called the Valley of Enchantment.

There Thompson, a veteran of several hurricane and earthquake recoveries, conferred with managers Bob and Rose Melis. “I’m on the primary response team for temporary housing,” he said. “I’m here to assess the need for temporary housing for people displaced by this disaster.” The couple said they had six spaces available with more vacancies opening up in a few weeks. They also said they required credit checks for residents. Thompson suppressed a smile. “I think if FEMA is paying the bill, their credit is pretty good,” he said. “I don’t think they need a credit check.”

Later, visiting Old Waterman Canyon where numerous houses were destroyed, Thompson shook his head at a scene that could have come from “Blade Runner.” The terrain was just too rugged to place a trailer next to a home while it was being repaired or rebuilt. As a UH-1 helicopter dangling two utility poles rotored overhead, Thompson, who has coached his three developmentally disabled sons to Special Olympics medals, described his method of operating in disaster areas: “You feel for them, but you’ve got a mission and have to focus on your

mission,” he explained. “Emotion has to take a back seat. You’re too busy reading the road and working your 12-to-14 hour days.”

“Without geography, you’re nowhere,” says the Caribbean philosopher Jimmy Buffett, and Doug Swanson, a geographer from Portland District, would agree. Swanson and his colleagues, Kathleen Bergman from L.A. District’s Arizona office, and Steve Long from Philadelphia District, jetted into SoCal soon after the word went out that Corps emergency crews were needed.

And were they ever. Within two weeks the GIS specialists had fielded and met more than 600 requests for cartographic products. Need to know where Red Cross shelters are each day? The GIS team provided maps to help residents find temporary refuge from evacuated areas. Want to identify potential flood areas affecting American Indian lands? They plotted them in less than a day.

Where are the ethnicity and foreign language areas in the region so aid workers can identify their various requirements? GIS produced. Crucially, the team also acquired and distributed flood plain, slope and elevation data to emergency response workers so they’d be better prepared for possible mud and debris flows following rainfall in burn areas.

Swanson recalled another request: “’Show me all the roads leading to the fire areas, paved with asphalt, wide enough for a fire truck with no bridge overhang lower than 12 feet.’ We use satellite data, aerial photography and now the Predator (drone aircraft)” when cloud cover or smoke prevents safe manned flights, he explained. “We even considered using the U2 (the famous high-flying spy plane),” the Air Force veteran said.

If seeing is vital for Corps and other emergency crews, talking and listening are too. That’s why the Division dispatched its version of the Batmobile—Emergency Command and Control Vehicle #3—from Sacramento District. Within two days of deployment, the vehicle—one of only six available nationwide—was sending and receiving from Harbison Canyon in San Diego County. Wildfires had roared through the canyon, destroying homes and knocking out all phone communications.

The 36-foot-long rig on an International Harvester chassis was anchored at a community center and immediately began providing electric power and communications through telephone and data lines.

“We were using the satellite dish to capture the signal, hooked to a satellite, linked back to a satellite provider in Virginia,” said Gary Fong, a 30-year-Corps veteran and team leader of the Deployable Tactical Operations Center. He estimated that the EECV hooked up 200 people in 10 days with phone, Internet, hand-held radio and other commo. “We support FEMA every way we can,” he said. “There were no glitches.”

Joan Didion, the famous California writer, once wrote: “Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse…. The winds show us how close to the edge we are.”

With their work on the wildfires, the women and men of the Corps emergency teams helped a lot of Californians pull back from the edge.